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ON PAGE A-4

NEW YORK TIMES
22 MAY 1981

U.S. Sent Two Patrols Into Laos in Quest of G.I.'s Thought to Be Captives

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 21 — The Reagan Administration sent at least two long-range patrols into Laos in response to what a high-ranking official called " tantalizing hints" that American prisoners of war were still alive in that country, Administration officials said today.

The patrols of 20 to 30 men, mostly Laotians, did not bring back the evidence they sought, the officials said. No American military personnel were involved in the operation, the officials said, but civilians under the supervision of the Central Intelligence Agency helped to plan, finance and train the patrols.

Whether the Americans accompanied the patrols into Laos was not clear, and other details of the operation were sparse. But officials said that it was mounted with the approval of the State Department, with intelligence information from the Defense Intelligence Agency, and under the operational control of the C.I.A.

Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger issued a statement today saying that the Defense Department "has checked and will continue to check regularly and with great care" the recurring reports of Americans held in Southeast Asia.

Pledges 'Appropriate Action'

The Secretary's statement said that "should any such report prove true, the Department of Defense can be expected to take appropriate action." What such action might be was left undefined. "Meanwhile," the statement concluded, "the Department of Defense will refrain from commenting, now or in the future, on specific reports affecting such matters."

Pentagon officials said that 2,528 American military personnel remain unaccounted for after the conflict that ranged across Southeast Asia from the mid-1950's until 1975.

The officials said that the recent missions were mounted after aerial photographs, taken either from satellites or high-flying reconnaissance planes, showed what appeared to be a stockade or prison compound in southern Laos. The Ho Chi Minh Trail once passed through this area on its way from North Vietnam to South Vietnam and the region was subject to heavy American bombing and infiltration.

The site was described as being unlike the Laotian villages in that region, with fences and towers clearly intended to keep people in rather than to keep potential enemies out. A figure "52," suggesting the B-52 bombers that had bombed the area, was visible, the officials said, but whether it was of natural or man-made origin could not be determined from the pictures.

In addition, the fields around the village were not cultivated for rice, typical in that region, but for other crops such as vegetables that suggested a Western diet. Some tools also appeared to be more Western than Laotian, the officials said.

Moreover, the photographs, which were of high resolution from sophisticated cameras, lenses and film, showed people sitting crosslegged and square on the ground rather than squatting on their haunches in Asian fashion.

That led the Reagan Administration, the officials said, to take a closer look to ascertain whether Americans were there. The officials said the patrols were assigned to gather information, not to attempt a rescue.

While the officials were guarded in discussing the operation, they suggested that agents of the C.I.A., which had

trained, supplied and financed various Laotian guerrilla and paramilitary organizations for over 10 years during the wars in Indochina, had recruited the members of the patrols from among Laotians who had worked for the intelligence agency before.

The former guerrillas, who were familiar with American weapons and methods, were assembled at a base in an undisclosed location for training. The officials said that the patrols were then moved close to the border that runs north and south between Thailand and Laos and inserted on the ground to the east. There were suggestions that Americans of Oriental descent had accompanied the patrols into Laos.

Senior officials of the Thai Government were informed of the operation, officials said.